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Disc Reviews

SYSTEM OF A DOWN: Toxicity
(American/Columbia)

More gutsy, more brainy, more explosive — all of those comparatives apply to System Of A Down when the Los Angeles band stands next to the recent crop of metallic MTV-ready boxcos. "Toxicity," the band's second disc, might not become the definitive L.A. nu-metal opus, but it's a relatively productive slab o' chaos. Vocalist Serj Tankian obviously was schooled on Slayer, but he's as much a singer as a growler, and his political agenda shows similar range: Things aren't all right at home (the thrashy single "Chop Suey!" swims in weird familial guilt), but that's no excuse to ignore the conspiracy down the street — "Drug money is used to rig elections/And train brutal corporate-sponsored dictators around the world," Tankian intones during the deceptively focused "Prison Song." The rest of the System's day is filled with chugga-chugga guitar riffs, the evening news, Sunset Strip annoyances and the hovering sense that gangsta rap has squandered its direct hook-up to L.A.'s street conscience. Tankian and two other members of System of A Down are of Armenian heritage, giving them proud outsider status and unlikely clarity when peering at their city. As a result, though, "Toxicity" pushes every button at once, and the band rarely tries to reconcile its juvenile energy with the start-stop-start musical complexity that bubbles up so naturally. Things coalesce more on the second half of the disc — notably on the jazz-blast "Shimmy" and the sweeping title track — but in the end, the 44 minutes of "Toxicity" seem more like an hour and a half. Some might consider such density an asset. For System Of A Down, however, it's probably just a promising affliction.

— Joe Warminsky III

System Of A Down, performing with Slipknot, American Head Charge, Rammstein and Mudvayne as part of the Pledge Of Allegiance Tour, 7 p.m. Oct. 17, First Union Spectrum, Broad Street and Pattison Avenue, Philadelphia, 215-336-3600.

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▲ Puddle Of Mudd
... old-fashioned buzzy grunge.

▲ Cold
... can't quite capture the dankness.

▲ American Head Charge
... a losing battle for anyone with an open mind.

AMERICAN HEAD CHARGE: The War Of Art
(American)

American Head Charge falls into the sprawling category of nu-metal bands that all sound approximately alike. This means the Minneapolis group's debut disc, "The War Of Art," has songs with titles such as "Breathe In, Bleed Out" and "A Violent Reaction" and features grinding guitar riffs, industrial motifs and alternately bellowed and droning vocals (performed with unflaggingly one-dimensional gusto by a Mr. Martin Cock). I could point out that AMH distinguishes itself a bit from even more monolithic outfits by employing (count 'em) two keyboardists (who are even slightly audible occasionally) and straying every now and then into something like melody and rhythmic variety. But in the long run American Head Charge is just another numbingly unimaginative aural gesture and "The War Of Art" a losing battle for anyone with an open mind.

— John Terlesky

American Head Charge, performing with Slipknot, System Of A Down, Rammstein and Mudvayne as part of the Pledge Of Allegiance Tour, 7 p.m. Oct. 17, First Union Spectrum, Broad Street and Pattison Avenue, Philadelphia, 215-336-3600.

PUDDLE OF MUDD: Come Clean
(Flawless/Geffen)

Thanks a lot, Fred! Limp Bizkit's wannabe media mogul — Mr. Durst to you and me — has his very own label, Flawless, which is likely to be the launching pad for a million rock 'n' roll dreams now that Puddle Of Mudd's single, "Control," is in heavy rotation coast-to-coast. Why was Puddle Of Mudd the first band signed by Flawless? Well, singer-guitarist Wes Scantlin sounds like an improved version of Mr. Durst, who seems more and more enamored with playing the crooner. It's kind of like Prince surrounding himself with all those Appollonias and Vanities during the '80s, I guess. To the band's credit, Puddle Of Mudd avoids Bizkit-style grooves and instead churns through nothin' but old-fashioned buzzy grunge songs on "Come Clean," its debut disc. The results are serviceable, and the world view is predictably Durst-like, with Scantlin devoting most of his time to bad memories, bad women and bad memories of women. It ain't Soundgarden, but it ain't Silverchair, either. But let's get back to the point: Big Bad Fred is building an army, folks. Prepare for the worst.

— Joe Warminsky III

COLD: 13 Ways To Bleed On Stage
(Flip/Geffen)

The disconnectedness and angst that were so much a part of grunge perfectly complemented the region from which it sprang, the Pacific Northwest, where great natural beauty exists under threatening, almost permanently gray skies. Cold's second disc, "13 Ways To Bleed On Stage," owes a lot to the bleak musical and spiritual terrain charted by Pearl Jam, Alice In Chains and, to a lesser extent, Nirvana. But somehow, Cold, coming from the balmier, sunnier climes of Jacksonville, Fla., can't quite locate the dank darkness needed to crystalize "13 Ways" tales of emotional freeze-out. So all of the moaning and groaning from these five self-described "redneck Goths" ultimately seems listless, even supine (small wonder these guys are signed to one of the labels run by the limpest Bizkit, Fred Durst). The single "Just Got Wicked" is the most varied track (imagine the Beastie Boys as a grunge-metal band), and vocalist Scooter Ward's tiny snarl offers some catharsis on "Confession." But generally Cold is content to link these endlessly dyspeptic tunes together like so many breakfast sausages.

— Len Righi

Cold, Dope and Lifer, all-ages show, 8 p.m. Tuesday, Crocodile Rock Cafe, 520 Hamilton St., Allentown, 610-434-6000.

▲ P.O.D.
... pietistic platitudes, unquestioned beliefs.

LIVE: V
(Radioactive)

To be honest, I never listened to a Live album before. I'm not even sure that I made it through one of their overplayed hit songs; the combination of bombast and self-righteousness that characterized the York, Pa., band's platinum-selling output always caused an involuntary reaction in my hand to twist the radio dial whenever I heard lead man Ed Kowalczyk's bleating vocals. So "V," Live's most recent studio offering, comes as a little surprise to me, if only for a while. On first spin you can't help but admire the group's grasp of pop devices, the union of formulaic songwriting and studio gimmickry that made the tracks fairly easy to endure, and certain to generate heavy rotation. But closer listening reveals the same old poses — Kowalczyk as Cosmic Ambassador to the World ("Simple Creed," "People Like You"), Kowalczyk as Spiritual Revolutionary ("Like A Soldier," "OK?"), Kowalczyk as Top 40 Visionary ("Overcome," "Hero Of Love") — if performed in a less heavy-handed manner than before. While that effort toward giving Live's pop spirituality a "TRL"-ready gloss makes "V" more accessible to non-Live fans, it also suggests that, for all Kowalczyk and Co.'s preaching about belief, their main belief is in selling as many units as possible.

— John Terlesky

Live, Jane's Addiction and Femi Kuti, 7 p.m. Wednesday, First Union Spectrum, Broad Street and Pattison Avenue, Philadelphia, 215-336-3600.

P.O.D.: Satellite
(Atlantic)

Chanting has been a staple of religious music for centuries, and that venerable tradition is continued with uncommon zeal by born-again Christian quartet P.O.D. on "Satellite," the San Diego group's second major-label album (fifth overall). Vocalist Sonny Sandoval's repeated throat-shredding commands and commentaries — "Rise!" (on the grinding "Set It Off"), "Fly!" (on the edge-of-delirium single "Alive"), "Boom!" (the bombastic "Boom") and "It's a masterpiece conspiracy!" ("Masterpiece Conspiracy") — compensate somewhat for the plethora of pietistic platitudes and humorless, unquestioned beliefs. P.O.D. (Payable On Death) has accumulated millions of disciples via Ozzfest 2000 and MTV — "Rock the Party" (Off The Hook)," from 1999's "The Fundamental Elements Of Southtown" disc, reached No. 1 on "TRL." But for some reason Christian TV moguls such as Mother Angelica, Aunt Patsy and Pat Robertson have not sanctioned P.O.D.'s marriage of monster metal riffage and glib hip-hop parables. (Maybe if the chant-happy lads dressed in ethnic Bulgarian costumes, or fancy, colored choir robes ...) Although I am not intimately acquainted with every tenet of P.O.D.'s belief system, the band's ecumenism is something to behold. The foursome easily accommodates Rastafarian preaching from Eek-A-Mouse (on the spacey, preparing-for-the-Second-Coming "Ridiculous") and former Bad Brains front man H.R. (on the part-hardcore, part-reggae "Without Jah, Nothin' "). In fact, the rambling H.R. is such a natural at expounding on next to nothing, I suspect that given a half a chance, he would fit right in on "The 700 Club."

— Len Righi

BLUE OYSTER CULT: Curse Of The Hidden Mirror
(CMC International)

In the old days (aka the '70s) Blue Oyster Cult could set cities aflame with rock 'n' roll. For almost 20 years, however, the Long Island metal band has been trying to do it with smoke and mirrors. Not that that troubles the quintet's devout supporters — including those in the Lehigh Valley who could claim Donald "Buck Dharma" Roeser, Eric Bloom, Allen Lanier III, al. as dependents on their tax returns, considering the number of times BOC has harvested a paycheck in these parts (don't fear the reaper, indeed). "Curse Of The Hidden Mirror" is BOC's second studio album in 13 years (1998's "Heaven Forbid" was the other, trivia buffs), and if you don't listen too closely, you can ignore its soft white underbelly. Vintage BOC tunes often had a sense of humor and melody to leaven the band's apocalyptic tendencies, even on such off-the-wall entries as "Godzilla" and "Joan Crawford Has Risen From the Grave." But the new songs "Dancing on Stilts," "I Just Want to Be Bad," "One Step Ahead of the Devil" and "The Old Gods Return" are just preposterous, despite some surface appeal. Even two heretofore-unfinished tracks — 1979's "Showtime" and 1983's "Stone of Love" (co-written by rock crit Richard Meltzer) — are virtual parodies. On "Hidden Mirror," the tyranny of the past is reflected in the mutation of the present. A curse for sure.

— Len Righi

Blue Oyster Cult, Black Faith, Quazee Moto and guitar soloist Scott Erickson, 8 p.m. Thursday, Crocodile Rock Cafe, 520 Hamilton St., Allentown, 610-434-4600.

LUCY KAPLANSKY: Every Single Day
(Red House)

"Every Single Day" is a pleasantly honest, overly meek record from Lucy Kaplansky, a singer much admired by the likes of Bryan Ferry and Nanci Griffith. "Written on the Back of His Hand," one of seven songs written with husband Richard Litvin, has the gentle pluck of a recent tune by Griffith. Kaplansky reinforces the connection with country-tinged, watercolored singing and musings about conquering abuse ("One true word's gonna beat a pack of lies"). "Don't Mind Me" has sassy lyrics about a "maniacal" love: "I just wanna get you on the ground/Play a little lost and found." Mary Chapin Carpenter would make it rip; here, it just wags happily. Kaplansky puts her doctorate in clinical psychology to good use in "Nowhere," a beautifully tuned commiseration of misery, and "Song for Molly," a moving journey through family illness, forgetting and a binding ring. Arrangements and performances wash easily, with supple, snappy leads from guitarist Larry Campbell, who tours with Bob Dylan. Harmonies are unusually well-balanced, with fine partnerships from John Gorka and Richard Shindell, Kaplansky's companion in Cry Cry Cry. Kaplansky's pristine, fairly careful voice works wonders in the finale, a haunted-holler version of the Louvin brothers' "The Angels Rejoiced Last Night," where a mother's death makes a gambling husband finally pray. Spare and expansive, it banks the heavens.

— Geoff Gehman

Lucy Kaplansky, 7 and 9:30 p.m. Thursday, The Point, 880 W. Lancaster Ave., Bryn Mawr, 610-527-0988.

Joe Warminsky III and John Terlesky are free-lance writers.

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